

A Close Reading of Joseph Bruchac's "Ellis Island"

Directions

Read the following poem silently. Try to figure out the poet's main message.

Beyond the red brick of Ellis Island¹
where the two Slovak² children
who became my grandparents
waited the long days of quarantine³,
after leaving the sickness,
the old Empires of Europe,
a Circle Line ship⁴ slips easily
on its way to the island
of the tall woman, green
as dreams of forests and meadows
waiting for those who'd worked
a thousand years
yet never owned their own.

Like millions of others,
I too come to this island,
nine decades the answerer⁵
of dreams.

Yet only part of my blood loves that memory.
Another voice speaks
of native lands
within this nation.
Lands invaded⁶
when the earth became owned.
Lands of those who followed
the changing Moon,
knowledge of the seasons
in their veins.

¹ Ellis Island: island in New York Bay that served as a gateway for immigrants coming to the United States

² Slovak: person from central European nation of Slovakia

³ quarantine: separating sick people or animals from the healthy to prevent disease from spreading

⁴ Circle Line ship: ship owned and operated by Circle Line Sightseeing Cruises in New York City

⁵ answerer: someone who or something that provides what someone hopes or prays for

⁶ invaded: entered a place, such as a foreign country, to take control by military force; entered a place in large numbers

Initial Reflection

Now that you have read the poem, write a brief paragraph of three to five sentences summarizing the basic message of Joseph Bruchac's "Ellis Island." Include the author and title in your topic sentence.

Example

Joseph Bruchac's "Ellis Island" is about _____.

Directions to Listen

Now listen as this poem is read to you. Do you notice anything you missed the first time?

Text-Dependent Questions

Answer the following using complete sentences.

1. Who is “the tall woman, green” that Bruchac refers to? What does she represent to immigrant communities?
2. The speaker mentions his grandparents and their struggles. Using evidence from the poem, explain the difficulties the grandparents faced.
3. The speaker refers to the island as “the answerer of dreams.” Whose dreams is the island answering? Which evidence from the text supports your answer?
4. The speaker has another voice that speaks to him. What does this voice say? What is the tone of this voice? Which evidence from the text supports your answer?

5. What are some emotional struggles the speaker might be experiencing?
6. Bruchac separated this poem into three stanzas. Look at the separation points. Why did Bruchac choose to separate the lines as he did? What impact does it have on the rest of the poem?

Final Reflection

Now that you have read the poem several times and completed text-dependent questions, you should have a deeper understanding of the poem. In a paragraph of five to seven sentences, explain the speaker's tone and identify when and if the tone changes in the poem. Include the author and title in your topic sentence. Include at least two quotes from the text to support your answer.

Examples

In Joseph Bruchac's "Ellis Island," the speaker has a _____ tone.

In "Ellis Island," Joseph Bruchac sets a tone of _____.

The speaker states, "_____."

Bruchac writes, "_____."